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ABSTRACT

Canada's French immersion program began in 1965 in response to anglophone parent demand for bilingual French/English instruction. Instruction entirely in French begins in kindergarten, and formal English instruction begins in third grade. The program's popularity has caused rapid expansion, with success attributed to changing attitudes toward second language learning, growing acceptance of Canada's bilingual character, empirical research about the benefits of bilingualism, and perception of the role of bilingual competencies in socio-economic mobility in Canada. Most immersion students are anglophones, most teachers are native francophones, and parents are actively involved. The instructional approach used emphasizes the communicative function of language. Five major immersion principles are applied, including: (1) it is possible to recreate in the school a natural imitative environment resembling that of first language acquisition; (2) early second language exposure is most effective; (3) learning a language is learning to use the language; (4) language similarities and transfer of knowledge are more significant than interferences in language learning; and (5) children are more interested in content than in the form of instruction. While French immersion is based on a curriculum identical to that of English-language instruction, the immersion classroom can also act as a meeting point of different cultures. (MSE)

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Insights From the French Immersion Experience in Canada

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Introduction

French immersion is a program of bilingual education launched in 1965 when a group of anglophone parents convinced a school board in the suburbs of Montreal to start an experimental bilingual class in which instruction was to be given to anglophone children in English and French. The success of the experience led to the opening of more classes and more programs which developed into the widely popular French immersion education. Immersion refers to the method used to teach school subject matters through a second language, in this case French. The term immersion means that the students are literally immersed in the French language from the very beginning of their school experience.

French immersion education begins at the Kindergarten level and for three years the students, who arrive with no prior French language skills, receive all of their instruction through the medium of the French language. From grade 3 on formal English instruction is introduced for about 20% of school instruction time. The school subjects taught in English receive gradually more instruction time until instruction becomes 60% in French and 40% in English at the grade 7 level. The proportions are reversed at the secondary school level until instruction in French is reduced to about 20% of total instruction time at grade 12. Although French immersion has thus far been offered only from K to 12 some universities and post-secondary institutions in Canada have offered some courses in French.

The popularity of the program has helped it expand at a phenomenal rate. From one school and a handful of students in the experimental classes twenty five years ago, there are now more than 17000 schools offering French immersion instruction to close to 250000 students in all major Canadian cities. The popularity of the program is such that school boards, unable to cope with the demand because of the scarcity of qualified teachers, usually resort to a sort of lottery system to choose from the many applicants.

There are a number of reasons which account for the remarkable success of the French immersion programs in Canada; the most important of these include : a) the changing attitudes toward the learning of a second language prompted by the waning of isolationist tendencies and increased cultural contacts with the rest of the world; related to this reason is the dissatisfaction with the mediocre results achieved by traditional second language teaching methodologies; b) the growing acceptance of the bilingual character of a Canadian national identity operating in a multicultural setting. And this despite the recent highly publicized vocal expressions of anti-French sentiments which took the form of city council resolutions across the country declaring their cities to be English-only municipalities. In reality, a recent poll showed that more Canadians than ever support the bilingual identity of the country and 75% of of all Canadian respondents support bilingual education in the two official languages of the country. This support is even greater among francophones. 90% of francophone respondents to the same survey said that they supported bilingual (English/French) education for their children (National Survey, 1990) ; c) the positive empirical research and evaluation studies' findings about the academic and linguistic benefits of bilingualism generally, and about French immersion educational achievements in particular; and d) the growing perception among Canadians of the rôle of bilingual competencies as an instrument of socio-economic mobility in an officially bilingual country. (Safty, 1988)

At the socio-educational level French immersion education presents some interesting characteristics which partly account for its success. French immersion children are largely majority children, i.e.; they come from anglophone homes; their first language (English) enjoys high status power and is not threatened by the second language; their socio-economic background is middle class and therefore more likely to provide them with a linguistically riche home environment; the majority of French immersion teachers are native French speakers, the rest possess native-like fluency; they are particularly enthusiastic and action-oriented; classroom learning experiences are organized in activities which clearly emphasize interactions and oral communications between students, on the one hand, and between teacher and students, on the other; parents are actively involved in school teacher-parent committees and take a sustained and marked interest in their children's school progress; they are also politically organized, enjoy high profile, and are recognized as important stake-holders in policy making decisions; French immersion students exhibit self-confidence and are aware of teachers' and parents' high expectations for their success. All of these factors and certain organizational decisions which may discourage access to the program of all but the most determined parents have prompted some critics to charge that French immersion education caters to the elites (Olson and Burns, 1983).

As a second language learning methodology the French immersion experience may have revolutionized traditional approaches to language teaching in so far as it highlighted the communicative function of the language and the necessity of viewing the language as a vehicle for communication rather than a subject to be studied. At the same time, French immersion has had dramatic impact on pedagogical approaches to all second-language teaching approaches in so far as it demonstrated the possibility of using with profit the linguistic and socio-linguistic principles which facilitate first language acquisition. A National Core French (French as a second language) Project launched by the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers and funded by the Canadian government recently proposed

a syllabus-based second language curriculum called communicative/experiential (The National Core French Study, 1990). It is based on many of the operative principles of French immersion. This article proposes to review some of the socio-linguistic and linguistic principles underpinning the French immersion approach to language teaching. It will also identify areas in second-language learning and teaching where the insights offered by the French immersion experience can have practical and constructive applications.

French Immersion Principles and Practical Applications in FSL

1. French immersion primarily relies on the assumption that it is possible to recreate in the school a natural imitative environment which resembles that in which the child learns his first language. For language learning purposes the home environment may be described as one in which there is constant exposure to the language, the parents as role models use a caretaker speech to communicate with the child and progressively introduce in their speech more complex sentence structures as the child's comprehension grows; the child's linguistic comprehension precedes oral production; there is total integration between culture and language each reinforcing the other; the level of parental education influences the variety and richness of the child's linguistic environment and has an impact on first language learning; first language learning at home is a process of trials and errors. Naturally, French immersion could not hope to replicate all these conditions at the school, but it achieves what may be considered a satisfactory approximation with remarkably good results for second-language learning.

The application of this principle to second-language situations will mean among other things that the linguistic environment in the second-language classroom must be as close an approximation as possible of the natural imitative environment of the first language.

To achieve this the second-language teachers need to interiorize a number of operational principles which include: a) the teacher's role as a language model and a mediator between the language and the learner is crucially important for it behoves him/her to make the learning environment linguistically rich and varied and to organize learning activities which cover a wide gamut of authentic and relevant language experiences; b) the second-language must cease to be a language to study and become a language to use. Language activities should therefore emphasize the "use" of the language in as authentic and varied language situations as it is possible to create; c) students will acquire and learn the second-language by imitation and through a process of trials and errors. Therefore, linguistic errors need to be viewed as an integral part of the learning process and should not be construed to mean failure to learn; d) the development of the second-language learner's comprehension and oral production skills should be given priority over other skills in the first years of exposure to the second-language.

II. French immersion is also based on the assumption that early exposure to a second-language is better than late exposure. This assumption is challenged by some who argue that there is no evidence to suggest that there is "a drastic decline" of second language learning abilities at any age (Ekstrand, 1979). It is also challenged on the basis of anthropological research findings on non-Western societies suggesting that adults can learn a second language perfectly (Hill,1970). Other researchers argue that any advantage young learners may have can be compensated for by using appropriate teaching approaches with older learners (Skutnabb-Kangas,1981). However, research on the authentic control of the phonology of a second language supports the notion that children acquire authentic pronunciation while adults generally do not (Brown, 1980: 48-49). In addition, while adults will acquire the morphology and the syntax of a second language faster than children, young learners will ultimately attain higher proficiency (Krashen, Long, and Scarcella,1979). Children are believed to demonstrate greater language learning abilities than adults (Edward & Casserly,

1976) possibly because of their brain plasticity in large areas of uncommitted cortex - especially in the left hemisphere where the structures of language are laid down- which diminishes as the child grows older and passes from the natural imitative language-learning stage to the conceptual learning stage. French immersion implicitly accepts the validity of this notion and consequently places considerable store on the authentic control of the phonology of the second language during the first years of the program. This results in the relegation to secondary importance, in the initial stages, of issues of morphology and syntax and the valorization of comprehension and oral production skills. French immersion also derives benefit from a corollary to the principle of early is better: the concept that children's metalinguistic competencies experience their fastest growth between the ages of 4 and 8 years (Hakes, 1980). This means that at this age the child may be able to learn a second and a third language almost as easily as he learned his first language (Wilton, 1978).

Practically speaking, second-language teachers can use with profit the principle of early is better. The most obvious route to take would be to persuade the school administration to introduce second-language classes from the earliest possible grades. School administrators and parents need to be reassured that it is possible for Linguistic and cognitive competencies to develop simultaneously in L1 and L2 (Wilton, 1978). Any careful planning for the introduction of immersion programs, and the expansion of second-language programs, must take into account the availability of qualified teachers, the impact on established school programs and personnel, the adequacy of teaching resources and curriculum materials, and the need to secure the support of the senior district administrators.

III. The major methodological thrust of French immersion is the so-called communicative approach to language teaching. The students are provided with learning situations that emphasize oral skills and a wide range of communicative competencies (Van Ek, 1987: 29;

Glucksberg, Krauss, and Higgins, 1975). The underlying assumptions is that learning a language is learning to use that language. The goal is to produce students who are "functionally bilingual" (Baetens Beardsmore ,1982), i.e.; able to *use* the second-language in a variety of authentic situations.

The practical transfer of this principle from French immersion to second-language classes can be facilitated in a number of ways. Firstly, second-language teachers can organize their language activities around meaningful content of interest to the students emphasizing the use of the language. One way of doing that would be to proceed by themes identified by the students themselves. The thematic approach is used by many second-language teachers who find that the flexibility it offers allows for enhanced cultural awareness and improved linguistic skills (King, 1990). A second possible way of implementing the principle of the primacy of the functional use of the language consists in organizing immersion week-ends in which the second-language learners will spend the week-end with a family speaking the second-language. A third way consists in organizing regular field trips to various areas of the community where the second-language is spoken, and in inviting members of that community to come to the classroom to make presentations in the second language about areas of knowledge already familiar to the students through the first language.

IV. French immersion accepts the notion that there may be interferences between English (the first language of the majority of the students) and the second-language being learned, in this case French. But the similarities between the two languages and the positive transfers they facilitate are much more significant in terms of linguistic and cognitive development than the differences. Ringbom (1987) drew attention to the important role that previous knowledge, cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic similarities play in facilitating second language learning. Linguistic skills acquired in the first language may be tapped to facilitate the acquisition and the

development of linguistic skills in the second-language (Adamson, 1988).

This can be accomplished more readily in the case of languages sharing considerable commonalties such as French and English (English and German; French, Italian and Spanish) than with languages sharing little or no similarities (English and Chinese, or French and Arabic). Thus the considerable commonalties of French and English can be put to profitable use by the second-language teacher. For instance, the common genetic sources, and the use by English and French (and Spanish and Italian) of Latin and Greek loan-words in the form of radicals, prefixes, and suffixes, have resulted in considerable vocabulary similarities. One study identified 4500 anglicisms in French and 6000 gallicisms in English (Mackenzie, 1939, cited in Hammer: 66). A systematic review of Larousse Dictionnaire Moderne Français-Anglais (1960) found that there were almost 11000 English-French cognates with the same or similar spelling and meaning (Hammer1976), and concluded that the use of cognates (ex: German wasser and English water) can help vocabulary acquisition in the second-language.

V. Language learning in French immersion is contextualized. That is to say that Language learning in French immersion occurs almost as a by-product of the children's interaction with meaningful content. In other words, the language is more used as a vehicle for teaching subject matters than it is studied as a subject. The underlying assumption is that children are more interested in content than in the form of what they learn (McGlaughlin, Rossman & McLeod, 1983) Further, the development of the child's intelligence is assumed to positively influence and to give impetus to the development of his linguistic abilities. Cognitive growth may precede and consequently reinforce linguistic growth. In the French immersion methodology the primary focus is not the learning of a second language but rather the learning of academic content through the medium of a second-language.

The practical application of this principle of contextualization can be facilitated by organizing second-language activities in such a fashion so as to extend knowledge already acquired in other school subject matters using the second language as a medium of instruction. This may be accomplished through the creation of mini-immersion experiences. Specifically, the second-language teacher in cooperation with the school administrators and other teachers involved, decide on a block of time during the school year, say the first two weeks of October and the first two weeks of March, and declare them to be immersion weeks. This means that during this time the second-language learners will have a mini-immersion experience in which they will be totally immersed in the second-language. All school subjects will be taught during this experience using the second-language as a medium of instruction. Obviously this strategy can be implemented more easily at the elementary level than at the secondary level with its compartmentalized and specialized approach to teaching. Alternatively, mini-immersion experiences can be created in different ways. For instance, one day a week may be declared immersion day in which the second language becomes the sole language of communication in the classroom. The second-language teacher can also, in cooperation with colleagues and administrators, teach some periods of another school subject using the second-language as the language of instruction. Thus, a Social Studies project may be taught in Spanish, an Arts project may be conducted in French. Physical education is a particularly interesting activity to teach in the second-language. The spontaneous and energetic impulses it helps release in the students create a dynamic disposition to receive and use information sensitized by the "heat" of the physical energy and excitement. The use of the second-language in a Physical Education class can give second-language learning a naturalness and an authenticity that classroom situations cannot duplicate.

Conclusion

French immersion is generally considered the most successful language teaching program in the annals of Foreign language teaching. It has its share of critics and detractors and falls short of achieving what many people unfairly expected to be perfect bilingualism. But it does achieve what it set out to accomplish: the imparting of functional bilingual competencies, in the sense of being able to use the second-language in a variety of authentic situations, to students who otherwise would not be considered functionally bilingual. It does so by boldly challenging many of the erroneous assumptions about bilingualism and by giving a vivid demonstration of the validity of a number of socio-linguistic and linguistic principles. The most significant of these may be summarized as follows: a second-language can be learned effectively if an approximation of the natural imitative environment in which the first language was learned could be created at school; a second-language is more easily learned when children are exposed to it in a sustained fashion from an early age; the principal function of a language is its communicative attribute, learning a language should therefore mean learning how to use that language for communicative purposes; a second-language, like a first language, can be learned effectively if it is presented in a context of meaningful and relevant content to which the learner can relate.

There may be little by way of revolutionary thought in these preceding apparently inconspicuous principles, but the challenge resides not in intellectually apprehending their meaning but in interiorizing their philosophical implications. This would in effect affect not only how we teach second-languages but also how we relate to all languages as ubiquitous symbols of culture and indispensable tools of communication. Languages will no longer be a collection of incomprehensible "foreign" codes representing an alien and distant culture. They will come to be more generally perceived

as tools of functional communication and creative expressions; learning a second and a third language will be more widely viewed as an enriching, and linguistically and culturally stimulating experience; one of the few experiences which, like music, transcend man-made artificial differences to connect with and highlight the common destiny of humanity.

Finally, it is necessary to say a few words about language and culture. It is commonplace nowadays to assert that language cannot be divorced from its culture, but it is a statement that bears repeating. Language learning is intimately linked to learning about the culture of which the language is a powerful symbol. Learning a second language becomes therefore learning a symbol of intercultural communication. And it is this aspect of intercultural communication that needs to be emphasized. French immersion does not offer an example in this regard since it is essentially based on a school curriculum which is identical to the English curriculum cast in all the paradigms of the dominant culture (Safty, 1989). Effective intercultural communication involves more than a simple intellectual appreciation of an "alien" culture, it requires the establishment of bridges of empathetic interactions between two cultures with different but valuable and equal codes and symbols for the interpretation of man's existence. Learning a second language needs to be viewed no longer as a window (Corson, 1989) through which the culture can be observed but as a wide open door through which the culture makes itself accessible. The second language learner is invited to enter and "feel" the creative energies, relate to the communicative codes and the interpretive symbols which collectively are enabling a group of people to make sense of, give meanings to, and point to new directions in their common existence. The least the second language learner can do is to graciously accept the invitation and attempt to empathetically relate to the culture that has just laid its soul bare.

Practically speaking, the second-language classroom can become a meeting point of different cultures. Representatives of the culture of

the second-language should become frequent visitors to the second-language classroom. This will give the language and its culture relevancy and immediacy that surpass many an academic activities that can be organized. The sociology of settlement of new immigrants in North-American is such in that there is little equal interactions between representatives of the dominant culture and the new immigrants. The classroom can be a forum from which the cultural values of the second-language can be presented in a valorizing fashion by the representatives of the culture. These cultural interactions will leave the students marvelled, intrigued, curious, but probably largely surprised at the commonalties between cultures. The demystification of the otherness of the other culture is a necessary step toward lowering prejudices and enhancing equal interactions. The learning of a second-language as an intercultural communicative tool is a significant step in the that direction.

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